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THE PERSONAL RELIGION OF JESUS

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The very title means that Christian scholarship has learned to distinguish later conceptions and interpretations of religion from the presentation made by Jesus himself. For illustration we need only compare the views of the bishops in the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth century with the Sermon on the Mount. The fathers of Chalcedon honestly believed that the religion of Jesus as it had come down from the beginning was a metaphysical truth of the interfusion of eternal divine substance with mortal human substance, whereby the human was made capable of eternity of being. Christian discipleship meant the acceptance of this metaphysical truth on the authority of the church, and, secondly, the reception of the eucharistic bread and wine in which the union of two natures and the deification of man was conveyed from Christ to the believer. But in the Sermon on the Mount there is not a word of all this. There we have another theme and one more inspiring to the conduct of life. There the question is what kind of character in man shall show him likest God in character, and so heir to the blessings of divine companionship, a citizen in God's kingdom. Within the New Testament itself there are added interpretations and later developments, but the New Testament writings never lose sight of that which Jesus himself made the essence of all religion. Paul tells the Corinthians that many intense experiences and many vividly defined ideas shared by him and them are transient, while the permanent and central thing is that Christian life of which he chants a hymn in the name of love. This life—which is the very life expounded in the Sermon on the Mount—he calls the miracle of miracles. It is the divine life taking possession of man. Paul's theological ideas can be seen in the light of explanations of the attainment of so supreme a gift of the divine to the human. The beautiful first Johannine epistle, again, has for its one great idea the fact that the Christian character of love is the very indwelling of God in man. Here again there is fidelity to the preaching of Jesus.

But, on the other hand, the Johannine gospel, as we have come to see, presents the life and teachings of Jesus in a form of missionary propaganda. The life that Jesus taught and kindled is meeting the conflict of the mission field. To cleave to it or reject it is to accept or deny the spiritual mastery of Jesus. Therefore the gospel is written to set forth the supreme validity of Jesus as a spokesman of God and the gospel uses forms of thought which had come to pass since the time of Jesus himself.

The Christian church is therefore now constrained to turn to the older gospels for the true record of the preaching of Jesus and to see in the first and third, the gospels of Matthew and Luke, collections which but enrich the plain and fundamental and earlier narrative of Mark. Our first three gospels also allow some criticism, and a critic by profession is led into many subtle and complicated views concerning the details. These discussions gratify our persistent inquisitiveness, but, after all, for all important interests, the gospels tell their own story to the plain reader who seeks to know the religion of Jesus, and every reader can be critical enough if he reads them with one simple distinction in mind. For, as most men now agree, there was a public preaching of Jesus, and there were private and personal confidences with those intimate disciples who shared with him the faith of his messiahship. To the gospel writers, as for us, both public and private utterances were of everlasting significance, and writing in days when that which had been secret and hid from the many was now proclaimed on the housetop, they did not always accurately assign the more private and personal utterances to their separate place. Nevertheless, you and I can easily make the discrimination. Having a thrilling consciousness of a supreme commission, Jesus kept it for himself and his faithful few as ground for assurance that God would vindicate his proclamations in the great day when all should be known. Tell no man, he bids them, and in his public ministry he shows a majestic, a sublime reserve concerning himself. He will not exalt himself. He waits for the Father to instal him in that office for which he sees himself called. He shares with a few only that secret consciousness which is the justification of his daring simplification of religion, his sovereign analysis of the inheritance of Israel, his faith and

heroism in the experience of odium and failure and death. However momentous for him, and however significant for us, this consciousness of messianic commission, let us recognize the fact that it was a secret hid from the multitude, and not therefore made a necessary element of the religious demands on other men. Out of it came dogma, but Jesus did not make dogma. It was not used as a constraint of conscience, a test of allegiance for other men. When Jesus sent out missionary preachers to summon men to readiness for the kingdom of God, he did not charge them to proclaim anything concerning himself, his authority, his destiny. He did not declare, or bid others declare, what part he should fill in the great dawning of a perfect world. This is a significant and illuminating fact. It means that in all his public preaching Jesus is addressing men on the basis of the truth which was already the possession of Israel. No one has applied this obvious fact so instructively as the great Catholic scholar, the Abbé Loisy. Jesus revealed nothing—so Loisy puts it pungently and sharply. Jesus is *preaching* to awaken men with the revelation they have already. The ideas belong to the tradition of Israel. Israel named God Father. Israel trusted in God's moral providence. From Israel's Holy Word Jesus quotes the mandates to love God supremely and the neighbor as preciously as we should love self. "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" asks the young man, and Jesus bids him consult the Law. Jesus proclaims the impending advent of the kingdom. Society had already been profoundly stirred by the same proclamation from John the Baptist, and we find in the discourses of our Master, not new explanations of the idea of the kingdom, but impassioned insistence that men shall be ready for the kingdom. They are the discourses of the preacher winning souls rather than of the teacher disclosing mysteries hitherto unknown. Let us look at these public appeals, which are neither dogma nor law.

Jesus says: The perfect order of life is at hand, therefore be ready now to live in it. Have the perfect heart now. It is a world of unselfishness, therefore subordinate the lust of possession, the lust for power. This is not the language of a mechanical asceticism making war upon natural needs. God means men to have food and raiment, he says, and we are to pray for sustenance, though in words

that renounce brooding anxiety and greed of much possession. Trust in the bounty of providence, responsive to your labor, but seek first of all, and above all, the spirit which alone capacitates for life in a perfect world. Jesus means that we must deliver the whole heart to the greater good; be single, have but one dominating purpose, and follow it relentlessly without a backward look. Seek that good as the trader seeks the priceless pearl, sacrificing all to obtain it. Subordinate all to the quest, even the desire of life itself. All this means that we are to live now as the coming perfection demands, to live with the sternest practical idealism, to disengage the heart from all compromises with a world not dominated by the law of the perfect. This is the uncompromising appeal which forever agitates the generations of men and awakens them to a sense of the illimitableness of the spiritual nature. Jesus claims a radical adjustment of the soul, a radical and sovereign aim and spirit, rather than a set of habits and rules.

This discernment enables us to determine what discipleship means. The Pharisees, as well as Jesus, spoke of righteousness as the condition of salvation, but they meant a set of abstinences or performances. The kingdom would be a reward for compliance with an intricate and detailed code. The code said, Fast! and the Pharisees fasted twice a week with ostentation. The code said, Pay tithes, and the Pharisee paid tithes even of garden weeds. Give alms, said the code, and the Pharisee sought to earn heaven by charitable deeds. Jesus, too, preaches righteousness, but he means the perfect heart of the perfect world; not a code of precepts, but the disposition and character of the soul. He gives no detailed rules and prescriptions. He seems to leave men free to freely shape life from within, in accordance with the insight that God's demand is for pure sincerity and love. If a rabbi vetoes every exertion on the Sabbath day, Jesus preaches that mercy and love are the whole demands of divine law, and spends effort on the Sabbath to do work of love and mercy. Therefore we are rid of the view, often expressed, that the precepts of Jesus are inconsistent with our wholly different civilization. Jesus was not speaking as a rabbi, with a set of decisions about conduct, of permanent binding force, decisions strict like those of Schammai, lenient like those of Hillel. He is telling men to live now with the heart that

has its citizenship in the kingdom of God, the heart that comprehends all duties by its own loving-kindness. It is true that Matthew's Gospel, compiled for a day when religious societies were being organized outside of Israel's tradition, seems to view Jesus as a second Moses, the giver of a new law. But the utterances so compiled and given the appearance of law, are easily seen to be counsels of moral hygiene, and are illustrations rather than rules. Jesus did not fast—he explains that he and his rejoicing company felt no need. But neither did he forbid fasting. He only says: *When* you fast, do not let publicity poison your interior attitude. Pray in secret, lest publicity corrupt the heart's simplicity; but he taught a form of public prayer and took part in the worship of the synagogue. Clearly these are not parts of a code of fixed precepts, but counsels about guarding the purity of our intentions. The real subject is not the duty of fasting, but purity of disposition; not the laws of prayer, but the principle of guarding the springs of action. As for alms, he says, let secrecy preserve the singleness of motive. Do not be tempted to seek the praise of men. Let not the left hand know what the charitable right hand is doing. Do not be like men who trumpet their good deeds, publish them for the world to applaud. But the same Jesus also reminds us that good deeds are a powerful motive force for those who see them, that we should make an atmosphere of good deeds, just as the lamp is lit to make the house bright. Only, *so* let your light shine, that the men who see your good deeds will praise *God*. These are instances enough to show us what Jesus preached: not a code of laws, but a spirit and character, and so far is he from being an innovator of a new set of ideas, that he enforces his preaching by appeals to the prophets. He is restoring the natural and simple and sane view of Israel's righteousness, though with unexampled keenness and persuasiveness.

So it is with regard to other ideas. He is not revealing and communicating the truth that God is Father, save as he makes the truth already spoken in Israel glow and burn with reality; save as he unfolds its thrilling assurance of forgiveness to every repentant sinner, and its rich hope of perfect good for all the poor and unlearned who respond to its constraint; save as he made it a truth irresistible by his illustrations; save as he himself embodied the divine illimit-

ableness of friendship, so that through the sovereign compelling goodness of his own being, the hearts of men blossomed up to God in glad recognition of infinite love as the nature of Israel's God. Jesus was not a teacher of cosmologies. He was not giving a science about the world to the inquisitive mind. With his supreme consciousness of God as author of all the goodness displayed in nature's bounty and ministered to man's spirit, he is securing the response of *hearts*. He asks for faith—not in the sense of the mind's acceptance of an idea, not as the submission of thought to authority, but as confidence, daring, heroism, making earnest with the fact of God's goodness, dismissing fears and anxieties, accepting all the glad expectancies that await children of boundless love, and so winning the power of soul which can triumph over bodily ill and be the spring of all healing and restoration. He is begetting life, and the life of faith in the supreme goodness is the discipleship which alone he asked. Be thou bold with faith, and endlessly expectant with faith, and be thou like God in unrestricted and illimitable goodness. That is the public preaching of Jesus, and I know not how it can ever be transcended, till man can see in God a character more ideal and more sovereign than love, or an attainment for man which can outrun the perfection of the highest ideal. And with this insight the disciple of Jesus is forever emancipated from any concern with the fact that in the sphere of science about things other than this life of imitating God, Jesus uses the ideas of his people and his time. The gospels make very distinct the announcement by Jesus that the great perfection would be within the lifetime of those who heard him, and the descriptions of its advent ascribed to Jesus are in harmony with the apocalyptic ideas of the time. Nevertheless, we observe that the emphasis with him is not upon the mode and fashion of the great revealing, but upon the human duty. Watch! be ready! Begin now that life of pure loving-kindness which alone has entrance there. He discourages the mere curiosity that reckons up the place and the date. The precise day and hour, he declares, are known to God alone. The angels know it not, nor the Son, but only God. This disclaimer of knowledge did not disturb the earliest Christians, and it should disturb no Christian of today. Not a science of God's providence, but spiritual response to it is the burden of the preaching.

Revise if we must the form of our expectations of higher destinies, the expectations persist undefeated, being kindled by the divine life pressing upon us, and the all-engrossing, all-important insistence of Jesus remains: It is the insistence that life today must be a preparation for the perfect order. Today we must begin—though it should cost homelessness and odium and sorrow and sacrifice—the life which finds its principle and its law in the spirit of the realm where all the strife and rancor of men and all the sufferings and tears have vanished in the peace and joy of God's family of embrothered children.

Having endeavored briefly to illustrate the fact that Jesus was not addressing men as a theological teacher, or as a lawgiver, but as one who, knowing the absoluteness of God in the love that flamed in his own pure heart, would inspire men to live by the simple essence of all righteousness; having wished to show that, according to the earliest record, he asked of the multitude no homage to himself, but only homage to the law of love, I pass to the most intimately personal aspect of his religion, that which concerned himself and his personal destiny, that which he shared as a secret with a few, at the end of his preaching, and which they were to tell no man. The instructive thing is to see that Jesus expressed no other spirit here than is manifested in his public teaching. When he discussed with chosen disciples his consciousness of a supreme personal commission, it was not for the communication of a dogma, but in order to incite and to express the same faith in a providence of divine goodness which is preached to all. He told them the story of his baptismal experience, the hour when the thrilling impulsion came to him to trust his burning enthusiasm for the gospel of love as the gift of the spirit of God, the gift of a sonship of responsibility. He told them the story of his temptation, showing how his faith in such a Messiah's commission had triumphed over all the interpretations of it, which a heart not single in love and trust might select; how he had set aside all alluring expectations and accepted a messiahship without the conditions which would accredit it to a curious world, without present power and rule over men, without special supernatural protection from danger, without even the guarantee of bread to still his hunger. The other utterances deal with the problem of the disaster and rejection and death that confront him in spite of his heaven-given

certainty of supreme commission. He is saying in many ways that even the highest commission from God must find its present use and duty in the experience of the world's disfavor and the world's infliction of death, and he is affirming, as in the great symbolic act of his last supper, that even the breaking of his body and the shedding of his blood must lie within the divine purpose of good to men. Just as in divining the future work of Messiah, when the great day should dawn, he seems to limit himself to the work of identifying those who have really had the heart of love, and of presenting them to the Father's favor; just as these traits of his prediction spring from the illimitable love of Jesus for men, so all the conversations about death are supreme manifestations of his certitude of the Father's providence of good, the heroic and triumphant communications to his followers of the absoluteness of faith in the fatherhood of God. It is thus that he makes himself the Son of Man, the man for all mankind, the supreme instance of the spiritual nature triumphant through love and faith. And, as we know, new faith burned in the disciples' hearts as they heard him. The new confidence in God was born—that marvelous confidence which sustains the Christian soul through all tragedies of affliction, that wondrous confidence with which the Christian Paul could glory in tribulation and count all suffering joy—because the love of God gave all such suffering as the sphere of deeper faith, and all weakness as the sphere of a supernal spiritual strength. And the culminating word of all these private communications was the assurance of triumph over death, of his resurrection to enter on the fuller work which belonged to his high commission. This sublime faith completes his significance for us. It makes him forever the great symbol and expression of the spiritual nature triumphant over the world and death. It makes him the ever-enduring challenge to man to live the life of the sons of God. The illimitableness and the compelling authority of the spiritual ideal are thus given us in the Jesus who so lived and spoke. When we think of what he taught, we find ourselves thinking of him who taught. His message is blended with his own life and person, and thus with all the magical power of person speaking to person, he becomes the friend of the soul, and by that friendship the very power of God to those who pray to be perfect as the Father is perfect.